

Public Health in North Carolina

-A Cost Saving Component in a New System for Health-

Providing Prevention-Focused Care, Improving Population Health, and Reducing Cost

Improved health status of North Carolinians will require evidence-based prevention and public health strategies at all levels of patient care. The answer to saving money in our state over time is not simply to provide cheaper medical care, but to provide more integrated, outcome-focused care.

The public health system in North Carolina has a long-standing history of strength and effectiveness at the local and state levels, and can contribute significantly to a sustainable, predictable Medicaid program both now and in our future.

Public Health leaders across the state are thinking critically, collaboratively, creatively and stand ready to make a difference. Any reform that truly improves the health status of North Carolina's population must incorporate our local public health departments. There are many ways the local public health system can help save dollars for Medicaid.

A few facts about North Carolina Public Health Departments include:

- **There is a local health department agency in each of North Carolina's 100 counties.**
- **Local health departments are already Medicaid service providers intensely focused on quality improvement, customer service, and improved health outcomes.**
- **Local health departments across North Carolina serve more than 100,000 non-duplicated individuals with clinic services each month: 51% are currently on Medicaid.**
- **Local health departments have been integral to the Medicaid cost savings realized since the creation of Community Care of North Carolina (CCNC). Currently, Obstetrics Care Management (OBCM) and Care Coordination for Children (CC4C) programs are conducted by local public health staff.**

Public health does not work alone – it is only together with many other community partners that we can accomplish improved health outcomes. For more than a century, NC local health departments have been convening communities, providing community health assessments, prioritizing health needs locally, assuring people have needed healthcare services, and effecting policies that make the healthy choices easier.

Local public health departments provide a valuable and dependable partnership to many existing healthcare entities in addressing cost savings, improving access and quality of care, and ensuring that the right care is delivered at the right place so that we may measure and track the best health outcomes for our ten million residents. As the Division of Medical Assistance studies improvements to the current Medicaid program, we would like to offer ideas for consideration.

“Evidence indicates public health programs improve health, extend longevity and can reduce healthcare expenditures.”

North Carolina Public Health Recommendations Include:

- **Incentivize prevention efforts in local health departments** for health education and health promotion activities, communicable disease prevention, and quality improvement projects in chronic disease prevention.
- **Support expansion of pregnancy care centering program** to all 100 NC counties.
- **Fund school-based annual assessments of children for health and educational risk.** Funding could be based on population of Medicaid and Medicaid eligible children rather than fee-for-service. A new approach would include a coordinated treatment plan by a public health nurse to connect primary care providers, public health, schools, and families.
- **Consider local health departments as new opportunities for incentivizing mental health and substance abuse** screening and prevention initiatives to reduce downstream costs for treatment.
- **Utilize local health departments to house telepsychiatry units** for follow-up to hospital emergency room crisis services as well as more routine psychiatric care for limited access areas of the state.
- **Continue coordination and cooperation between public health and Community Care of North Carolina** to create new and effective approaches in managing the delivery of health services to Medicaid patients.
- **Strengthen emphasis on prevention across public health and primary care** with evidence-based initiatives and jointly-funded projects that contribute to Medicaid savings.

Across North Carolina, local health departments have served as consistent service access points for generations; particularly for rural and disenfranchised populations. Funding levels have decreased for local health departments dramatically in recent years as regulations and mandates have increased. Leading change, quality improvement and efficiency are underway. As the United States begins to realize increased demand for primary care, the supply of primary care providers will not be adequate despite the existence of other types of community clinics.

North Carolina's local Public Health Departments can play a critical role with the unique setup of specially trained Enhanced Role Public Health Registered Nurses, to create a new level of "Preliminary Care" that can identify early stages of chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, breast and cervical cancer. The existing cadre of public health nurses can then use a physician's standing orders to start treatment and provide an appropriate referral to primary or secondary care services.

The current public health infrastructure can help improve the quality of care, relieve the strain on primary care providers in the community, and help save money for North Carolina. Cost savings will be realized across individuals, primary care practices, hospitals, insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid. The state of North Carolina, valuing and working closely with people in every county, can create a ripple effect of improved outcomes.

**"The health of the people is really the foundation upon which
all their happiness and all their powers as a state depend."**

-Benjamin Disraeli